

## meet it again in the morning by lymricks

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**Summary:**

That night, there's a thunderstorm so bad that it rattles the windows. The power goes out. It's the first thing, Billy will think later, that sets Steve off. It's the first thing that should have warned Billy that something was going to go wrong.

## 1. I: Storms

### Author's Note:

Welcome back to Chicago! This is the fifth work in a series. It takes place after 'and you may ask yourself but, as most of these do, it can pretty much stand on it's own. They've been together for a little under a year and a half at this point in things.

"despite how many times you've killed the animal inside you only to meet it again in the morning / breathing out of your own mouth"

— Natasha Oladokun, from "The Poem Climbs the Scaffold and Tells You What It Sees" published in The Adroit Journal

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"I don't think I actually remembered how pretty it can be when the sun comes out like this," Steve says, holding his hand out over the edge of the fire escape like he's checking to make sure it isn't raining.

Billy glances over at him, shrugs. "I have a higher standard for pretty these days--" he pauses and takes a drag from the joint he's got between his fingers, lets the smoke settle in his lungs before he finishes speaking, waits until he has Steve's full attention before he says, "*Pretty boy*," in his best impersonation of himself at seventeen, stupid and bitter in a locker room, but also a little too sincere.

Steve flushes and rolls his eyes and smacks Billy with one hand before he settles back against their building. It's exactly the reaction that Billy wanted. Steve is wearing one of Billy's old denim jackets and the rustle of its fabric scraping against brick is familiar and foreign all at once now that it's on Steve's body. It makes Billy feel warm all the way down to his toes, like he's bathed in the sunlight that flecks Steve's eyes with gold. Billy lifts the corner of his mouth in a smile and passes the joint to Steve.

Billy feels loose way deep down to his bones as they sit there, Steve's leg kicked out across Billy's, their shoulders not quite touching. April

had drenched Chicago in days of unending rain, but the first day of May ends like it began, warm and sunny.

“Hopper wants to know if we can come back to Hawkins for the fourth of July,” Steve says once he’s breathed in smoke. He tips his head back and closes his eyes and Billy can’t help himself, he stares, drinks in the long line of Steve’s throat, the rise of his collarbone under his t-shirt. Billy watches the way the sunlight hits his face and feels stupidly in love with him. It’s so fucking embarrassing. The Billy of three years ago would be horrified. At least Steve’s eyes are closed. At least he can’t see Billy staring.

The Billy of three years ago, fresh out of Hawkins and still picking fights in bars, would be horrified by a lot about the Billy of today, not least by his answer to Steve’s unasked question. “Yeah,” Billy says. “Let’s go, but I’m not putting out any fires he starts this year.” He means literally. Hopper is really fucking bad at fireworks.

The Billy of three years ago would also have a lot of fucking questions about any decision to go back to Hawkins, back to the more figurative flames, especially voluntarily, especially when Billy might be a little excited about it.

Billy hasn’t been back to Hawkins since he went in December, just before Christmas, to--say goodbye, or whatever. He hadn’t really wanted to go back, had declined every invitation. After about two months, Max and El had started coming out to Chicago. They’d drive together, the two of them, in a car that Billy checks over manically every time it pulls up outside. The idea of the two of them driving that long together makes Billy cringe. Of all the kids, Max and El remain the most--the most like Billy, honestly: the most reckless. The most stupid. The first to throw a punch.

Sometimes, he’s proud of that. Sometimes--like when he thinks of them on the *highway*--it makes him cringe. The girls had been up for the trek, had the time to drive to Chicago, but after a few melancholy phone calls with Dustin--who was working, who was busy--, Steve had finally asked if Billy would mind if he went back without him. “Fucking of course not,” Billy had said, rolling his eyes. “Your family is there, asshole. You can go without me.”

Billy thinks that he's probably ready, now. Or close enough to it. He'll be ready by July when the weather will make him think of California and that will lend him security. Or maybe it will just make him think of heat, of warm nights spent staring across a pillow into Steve Harrington's stupid eyes. Either way, security. And anyway, Billy's pretty sure that it's been enough time.

April had drenched them in rain and May has come with sunshine and Billy has stopped feeling afraid of his father's shadow.

"You sure?" Steve says. "I don't really care if you don't want to come, but I don't want to get the kids excited if--"

*If you can't do it*, he doesn't say. Once, Billy would have bristled at the implication, but he's not that same angry kid he used to be. He understands the sentiment, what Steve means. What he's really asking.

"You know," Billy says, voice quiet, taking the joint back from Steve and running his tongue along his lower lip. "I used to think that eventually I would fuck up badly enough that I'd end up back there." Under his father's roof, at his father's mercy, finally undone, every inch of him the fucked up piece of shit Neil always told him that he was. "I don't--" Billy pauses as he rolls the thought over in his brain. It's not that there isn't a part of him that he has to actively tell to shut the fuck up, sometimes. It's not that he's *certain*--he's not sure he'll ever be *certain*--it's just, "I guess I don't think that's as likely as I used to think it was."

He doesn't look at Steve when he says it. The emotion in his eyes, on his face would embarrass Billy too much for him to take, but Steve reaches across him and catches Billy's free hand, wraps it up in both of his own and holds it to his chest. Billy can feel Steve's heartbeat against the back of his hand, the rhythm of it more familiar, almost, than his own.

Billy inhales smoke and feels--serene, almost. Like he's at fucking peace or something stupid and sappy like that. The Billy of three years ago would *hate him* now. Billy's a little relieved, if he's honest, to know that. Billy settles back against the bricks and thinks about how nice and green the leaves look and doesn't wonder where he's

going to sleep tonight or what he's going to eat or if this time he's going to jail for real. He hasn't wondered those things in a year and four fucking months, and it's honestly nice. Serene is the right word. He does feel pretty fucking *serene*.

That night, there's a thunderstorm so bad that it rattles the windows. The power goes out. It's the first thing, Billy will think later, that sets Steve off. It's the first thing that should have warned Billy that something was going to go wrong.

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"Babe?" Billy calls out of habit when he gets home from work the next afternoon. It had been a long night after the power had gone out. It hadn't come back on for hours, and even then, Steve's sleep had been fitful at best. Billy had been ready to strangle him with the sheets he kept throwing on his body and then off, with all the wriggling around he did, even pulled tight against Billy's chest.

Billy loves the warm weight of Steve against his skin when he sleeps, but not when he won't fucking hold still. Eventually, finally, they had both gone to sleep. Steve's alarm for work had gone off too soon after. Billy had gotten a solid three hours of sleep once Steve had gone to work, and he had been grateful for it all fucking day, even as he felt a little bit guilty about the whole thing.

Still, he hadn't *actually* strangled Steve with the sheets. Just fantasized about it for a little while around 4:39am.

Steve doesn't answer him, but Billy can hear music and running water coming from the kitchen. He drops his keys in the little green bowl they keep by the door and kicks off his shoes, tosses his jacket over the back of the couch before he goes to investigate.

Steve's standing at the sink when Billy gets there. He's swaying a bit to the music and his sweatpants are low on his hips. Billy pauses in the doorway to just--just fucking look at him, at the curve of his ass and the way the muscles in his back shift under his tshirt. It's Billy's tshirt, actually. Billy could look at that all fucking day.

But he could also touch, if he wanted, and he does want. Billy hums

quietly along to the song as he walks up behind Steve. It's an easy, practiced motion, something he's done a million times: Billy presses himself along Steve's back, slides his hands up under the front of Steve's shirt to run his palms over the warm, soft skin of Steve's sides.

Except when Billy touches him, Steve jumps practically out of his skin. The plate he's washing crashes to the bottom of the sink when he does it. It shatters.

"Jesus!" Billy exclaims, jumping backwards, palms up. "Fuck, I'm so sorry. I thought you heard me come in."

Billy waits, three giant steps behind Steve, for the tension in his shoulders to drain. Only when Steve's shoulders drop, only when he turns around to face Billy, does Billy walk close again. "I'm sorry," Billy says again. "I thought you heard me come in."

He should have been prepared for this, he thinks, after a rough night. For Steve to be on edge. For him to need Billy to take things a little bit easy.

"It's fine," Steve says quickly. He glances down at his palm. "Shit," he says. "I must've fucking hit it on the plate."

Billy can see blood pooling on a cut across the flesh beneath Steve's thumb. It drips down his fingers to land on the floor. Billy walking closer, curls his fingers around Steve's wrist and turns him back toward the sink. "C'mere, easy," Billy says. Neither of them mention the slight tremor in Steve's hand as Billy guides it under the still running water. He stands close behind him, pressed lightly against his back, his chin hooked over Steve's shoulder as they watch water and blood drip over the shards of the plate in the sink. He waits until he feels Steve's breathing settle. "Bad day?" he asks, keeps the question light on purpose.

Steve shrugs. Billy's chin bounces a little with the movement. "Not great," Steve says. "I'm fine, though. I just didn't hear you come in."

"All right," Billy says, a little bit slowly. Steve shrugs him off and grabs a paper towel, pressing it to his skin.

"I think it stopped bleeding," he says, slipping out of Billy's grip. He's got a dish towel thrown over his shoulder. He drops it on the kitchen table when he walks by.

Billy blinks. Steve doesn't drop shit *anywhere* in the kitchen. He's so fucking tidy about it. He glances from Steve--now standing at the trash can wiping the paper towel over his bleeding skin--to the table. Underneath the rag, Billy can see the corner of a newspaper.

He frowns.

"Did you cook?" he asks Steve, sniffing. It smells good in the apartment, like roasted things.

"You were late," Steve says as he knocks the trashcan shut and examines his palm. "It definitely stopped bleeding."

"It's my night to cook," Billy protests, still eyeing the kitchen table, the corner of the newspaper.

"Billy," Steve says. "You were late. I didn't want to have to wait."

He's snippy, Billy thinks. Grumpy. Definitely a bad fucking day, then. "Thank you for cooking, princess," Billy says, a little snippy back, but mostly joking. Steve flips him off.

A timer goes off and Steve walks over to the oven, pulls the door open to peer inside. He's making roasted brussels sprouts and Billy loves him so fucking much. "I think they're done," Steve says. "Do these look dark enough for you?"

Billy walks over and checks Steve with his hip, lightly, peering into the oven. "They look perfect," he says. He plants a wet kiss on Steve's cheek just to hear him whine. "Want me to get them out of the oven?" He's thinking about the cut on Steve's palm.

"I got it," Steve says. "Move, you lug," and Billy smiles at him and moves.

It's the perfect moment. Steve's got the oven door held in one hand and an oven mitt on the other. Billy moves, just like Steve's asked, right over to the kitchen table. When he's sure Steve isn't looking, he

knocks the dishrag off to the side, revealing the newspaper underneath.

*Chicago Doctor's Throat Torn Out in Gruesome Murder* the headline reads.

Billy doesn't recognize the picture of the man in the newspaper, although it's clearly pre-murder because his throat looks just fine. He scans the article underneath, curious. He was just some government doctor working in Chicago. They found him late last night. There are no known suspects yet, but police are working hard, apparently. There are a lot of details about the corpse, how brutal the murder must have been. Billy makes a face. "Gross," he says, more to himself than to Steve.

When Billy looks up, Steve is staring at him, the oven still open, the sheet pan clutched in his hand.

"It'll burn through the mitt," Billy warns him. Steve sets--drops, really--the pan down on the stove with a clatter. He's pissed. Billy glances back down at the paper. "Did you know him?" he asks, motioning at the picture of the doctor. Billy looks back up, but Steve doesn't say anything. He grabs a spatula out of the drawer next to the stove and starts scraping the sprouts off the pan. The scraping sound of metal against metal makes Billy grit his teeth. "Steve," Billy says, pressing him a little. "Did you know this guy?"

Steve throws the spatula down onto the sheet pan. He's a fucking drama queen, is what he is. "God, Billy. Can't you just fucking leave it alone?"

Jesus. "If you want me to," Billy says, slow, "I will."

"I do," Steve snaps, "want you to leave it alone."

"You got it," Billy says back, a little shortly. He grabs the dishrag and drops it back down on top of the paper. After a second, Steve picks the spatula back up and resumes his scraping.

The awkward silence in the kitchen is broken when Steve tastes a brussels sprout and frowns. "Not enough salt," he says. "Can you get



me the salt?"

Billy does. Their fingers brush when he hands it to Steve. Steve exhales heavily. "I don't know him," he says. "He worked--with Will. After he went missing. Joyce and Hopper brought will to Chicago because this guy was a specialist and he knew about--about what Will went through."

Billy's known since December that there's more to whatever happened to those kids that year than he's been told. Of course he knows that. El can read minds. She has *superpowers*. Steve doesn't ever really tell him, though. He just dances around it, all vague details. Just like right now.

Whatever it was, though, something about that newspaper article has made him think about it. Has messed him up, made him jumpy. Billy feels like an asshole and he feels uncertain, like he doesn't know what Steve needs. He hates feeling that way. He hates it when he doesn't understand.

"Hey," Billy says, makes his voice soft. Steve has begun stirring salt into the vegetables. He looks up at Billy. "Can I do something?" Billy asks. He means *for you*, he means *to help*, he means *you're so sad and scared right now and I don't know how to make it better, tell me how to make it better*.

"You can get plates for us," Steve answers.

The tension in Steve's shoulders is all the clue Billy needs to know that Steve knows he wasn't asking about what he could do for *dinner*. Billy grits his teeth as Steve scrapes and scrapes and scrapes at the fucking sheetpan with stupid spatula and doesn't look up at Billy again.

It prickles across Billy's skin, being brushed off like that, but Steve doesn't need him to be angry, which is what Billy defaults to when he feels helpless or confused, or anything really. The anger is always there, waiting for Billy to split up, and Steve doesn't need that from him.

Billy gets some plates.

He also gets them both a beer because a little alcohol couldn't possibly hurt.

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For a second, when his eyes open, Billy doesn't understand why he woke up. But then he hears the sounds coming out of Steve's mouth on his side of the bed and he figures it out. The sounds make Billy feel like hot knives are shredding him apart from the inside out. Honestly, that would be preferable to hearing Steve *hurt* like this.

He's making these small, desperate, wounded sounds. When Billy sits up and turns the light on, Steve is curled up, pressed against the wall. It has to fucking hurt his spine. Looking at him, Billy feels pinched and raw, feels uncertain.

"No," he can hear Steve say, one of only two comprehensible sounds he's making. The other is *please*.

Billy doesn't fucking know what to do. He's never seen Steve have a nightmare like this. Usually it's screams and thrashing, or refusing to sleep and tossing and turning. This is--this is so different and Billy doesn't know if he should touch him.

Steve *whimpers* and makes the decision for him with the sound. Billy can't take it. "Harrington," he says, reaching out curling his fingers around Steve's flushed shoulder. His skin is hot to the touch, too hot.

"No," Steve says again, startles awake. He rips himself out of Billy's hand, presses further against the wall, gasping, his breathing erratic. He doesn't move after he pulls away, just holds so fucking still against the wall, eyes darting around wildly.

Billy knows that look. Knows the awful certainty of needing to get away, of knowing that you can't. Sometimes, when Billy dreams it is of a bookshelf pressed against his back, the smell of his father's breath, his hands.

Steve lets out a shuddering, wet breath, half a sob. His face twists again, losing some of its panic, but none of its fear. Billy thinks of the newspaper headline, of the way Steve had jumped when he walked

in. He doesn't know if he should touch him again.

"I was," Steve says, voice shaky, "I was trying--trying to get away and there was," he makes another low, desperate sound, another near-sob, "There was nowhere to fucking go."

"Sweetheart," Billy says, reaches out and cups Steve's cheek. "Sweetheart, you're at home, you're at home. We're in Chicago it's--there's nothing here." He pushes closer so that he can be the only thing in Steve's eyeline, fights to catch his gaze. "It's just you and me. Hey, come back to me, Steve. C'mon. It's all right."

Billy can feel Steve's breath against his skin. There's a long moment of silence in the wake of Billy's words. Steve's eyes dart around the room again, searching past Billy, searching every corner. Finally, Steve moves. He curls his fingers around Billy's wrist and shoves, pushes Billy's hand away from him.

"All right," Billy says, a little surprised. Steve usually likes to be touched, grounded, after he wakes up scared. Billy sits back a little, shows Steve both his palms.

All at once, Steve sits up, too fast. He's scrabbling at the sheets still tangled around him. "Off," he says, desperate again, "Fuck! Get them off me!"

Billy reaches out and pulls them away, drops them on his own lap and grips Steve's shoulders to still him, to keep him from jumping out of bed, which it sort of seems like he might try. "Hey," he says. "Hey, easy, you're all right." Billy quiets his voice, tries to sound calm and firm. "I've got you, easy. Easy." Steve still looks wild in the eyes. He shuts them.

A moment of frozen silence follows again, but there's a little more clarity in Steve's eyes when he blinks them back open. Steve sighs heavily, scrubs his hands over his face. He knocks Billy's hands off him in the process. Billy doesn't reach for him again, tries to give him the space Steve clearly needs.

"Fuck," Steve says. "Motherfucker." His cheeks are flushed when he drops his hands from his face. He looks embarrassed.

"Welcome back," Billy says, can't keep the relief out of his voice.

"Jesus," Steve says. "I woke you up. I'm sorry. Fuck. What time is it?"

Billy glances at the clock. "A little after 4."

"*Fuck*," Steve says again. "I'm sorry."

Billy doesn't say it's ok, because Steve hates it when he says that, but it is ok. Billy's not mad about it. He's mostly just--just worried. "You all right?" he asks.

"Yes," Steve says. Then, "No. *Fuck*. No--I'm--I'm not. Jesus." He's *shaking*.

Billy reaches out and presses his palm flat against Steve's back. His skin is sticky from the nightmare. Steve arches away from the touch so Billy drops his hand. "What can I do?"

"Nothing," Steve says quickly, sounding frustrated. "You can't--nothing. I need--"

"Yeah?" Billy asks, *anything*, he means. He'll do anything.

Steve crawls over him abruptly. "I need to talk to Nancy," he says. Steve clambors out of bed, lurches out of the room.

The sheets are still pooled in Billy's lap. He runs a hand through his hair and looks around the suddenly empty room, feeling cold. Feeling--feeling irritated, if he's honest. Goosebumps prickle over his skin.

Nancy, he knows, is something to Steve that Billy's never quite figured out how to be. Most of the time that doesn't really bother Billy. He doesn't let it, but tonight--tonight Billy stares at the same where Steve had been curled up in bed. He thinks that he could run his fingers and his lips over every inch of Steve's body and that it wouldn't give Steve the comfort that he finds with his back against the hallway wall, phone in his hand, Nancy's voice in his ear.

That prickles too. More than the goosebumps. More than the cold.

Billy tries to hear what he's saying, but he can't catch much aside from the low murmur of Steve's voice until, all of the sudden, Steve gets a little loud, an urgent edge to the words. "The power went out last night. Do you think--you don't think--"

There's a long moment of silence after. Billy nearly gets out of bed to make sure Steve hasn't passed out or fallen asleep in the hallway or something. Then Steve says, "I know. I know--I'm probably just being stupid. It's just--with everything that happened. And the power went out, Nance, it was like city wide--"

Steve's voice gets quieter and quieter, until Billy can't really hear what he's saying. He thinks that means maybe the conversation is over, so Billy stays sitting up in bed. He waits for Steve to come back, except he just--he doesn't. Billy can still hear the familiar sound of Steve's voice down the hall, fainter from the distance or the conversation, a little hoarse from his nightmare. Eventually, Billy drops back down against the pillows and pulls the blankets over his face. The stupid light is still fucking on and Billy doesn't want to turn it off while Steve still has to come back into the room.

Billy sleeps. It's a long time before he half-wakes to the bed sinking under Steve's returning weight. Steve burrows into Billy's arms, pushing at him until he can settle against Billy's chest. It's so normal, the feeling of Steve's chin against his collarbone, the warm puffs of breath against his skin, that Billy can almost forget the prickle of cold and goosebumps and something a little bit like jealousy. Almost.

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He might have even been able to let it go, except that the nightmares keep coming. Steve has the same sort of nightmare the next night, and the night after, and the next. It's always the same routine: Steve makes those sounds, Billy wakes up, wakes him up, and for a discombobulated moment Steve thrashes or sobs or curls up tight and away from Billy's touch. Then, always, every single time, he scrambles out of bed and runs into the hallway to call Nancy. He leaves Billy sitting there, wide a-fucking-wake, feeling like a useless asshole.

It's 3:47am on night five and Billy's over it. He's *over it*. Neither of

them have had a decent sleep since before the power went out and they're both wearing their exhaustion on their faces, carrying it in their piss-poor moods. Steve has snapped at Dustin no less than once a day and Max had hung up on Billy that morning, refusing to put up with his spacing out and biting comments. He doesn't blame her. Billy's just so fucking *tired*. They both are. They dance around each other during the days, both on edge, frustrated. Steve's had bad days and bad weeks, but it's never been this bad. It's a lot. It's a *lot* and Billy's tired and Steve won't talk to him about it, won't tell him anything about it, doesn't even bring it up even when their exhaustion is staring them in the face in the harsh light of their bathroom mirror.

So late on the fifth night, 3:47am, Billy wakes up to Steve making those sounds. Here, the routine deviates, because Billy doesn't have to wake him up. Steve catapults over him in bed. He lands on their bedroom floor with a thump, drags himself to all fours and dry heaves a few times. Billy just-stares at him. He doesn't even try to touch him, not even as Steve's shaking, gasping on the floor. Steve has made it clear he doesn't want to be touched, at least not by Billy, when he wakes up. Billy is doing his best to respect that, even as it shatters him.

"Sorry," Steve says, sitting back on his heels and wiping his mouth. "I just--I'm gonna--I just need to--"

"Talk to Nancy," Billy finishes. "Yeah, Harrington. I know."

Steve nods once, tightly, apparently doesn't hear whatever bitterness creeps into Billy's tone. He walks out into the hallway, leaning a bit on the wall as he goes.

Billy wishes he would just come back to bed instead. "Fuck," Billy breaths out, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes.

He hears Steve say hello and he can't fucking take it, so he gets out of bed and steps carefully, silently, to the door of the bedroom, peeks out into the hallway. El would tell him he's snooping.

"Nance," Steve says and Billy can feel the relief in his voice like it's a tangible thing. "Sorry to wake you up again," he continues. "I just--"

you're ok?"

Of course she's fucking okay, Billy thinks, except Steve just woke her up at ass o'clock in the morning for the fifth night in a row. Billy grits his teeth while he waits out the silence of whatever Nancy says in response.

Finally, Steve says, "Billy wouldn't understand."

Billy's mouth goes dry.

Every. Single. Fucking. Night. Every single one of them for five days, Billy has woken Steve up from some awful nightmare and every night this week Steve has crawled over him, breathing erratic, skin sticky, and called *Nancy* from the phone in the hallway. Has left Billy alone in their fucking bed. Billy's so tired. He's so tired and he's so frustrated and he just--he just--

He just wants to be told what the fuck is going on.

Had it really only been five days ago when Billy had told Steve about how good he's felt, lately? The light in the bedroom is harsh and yellow. It's nothing like the last rays of sunlight putting gold in Steve's eyes.

Billy grits his teeth and sticks his head further out into the hallway. He can see Steve, now, with his shoulders around his ears, slumped against the wall, sitting on the floor. His eyes are squeezed shut as he listens to whatever Nancy is saying to him, but all Billy can really see is that Steve's fingers are still shaking.

Steve's fingers are still shaking and he had sounded pretty goddamn certain that Billy *wouldn't understand*.

Fuck this.

Billy steps out into the hallway. "Hang up the phone," he says.

Steve's eyes open and he blinks up at Billy as he walks to him. Steve's eyes are wide and surprised and a little uncertain. That's good, because that's pretty much how Billy's been feeling for five nights in a fucking row. Goosebumps rise on Billy's skin. He feels ridiculous

standing here shirtless in the hallway as Steve stares up at him. "What?" Steve asks.

"Hang up the fucking *phone*, Harrington," Billy snaps. He crosses his arms over his chest.

Steve's face twists in confusion. "I'm talking with Nancy--"

"Oh for the love of--" Billy bends over and snatches the phone out of Steve's hands. He pushes it to his own ear. "Hi, Nancy?" Billy says, voice chipper and mean. "Billy here. Boyfriend of the mess currently shaking on the floor? I've got it from here so you just have a good fucking night." Billy slams the phone back into cradle, dimly aware that he's being an asshole and a jealous asshole at that, but unable to stop himself.

Steve's eyes are pinched at the corners. His mouth is tight. For a moment, they just stare at each other. "What the fuck, Billy?" Steve finally says from the floor.

"Get up," Billy says.

"You can't just fucking do--do whatever you want to! You're acting like a *child*--" Steve says, scrambling to his feet. "What's your fucking problem?"

"You are!" Billy says, all heat and venom. He slams his palm against the wall. "You and your secrets that I *wouldn't understand*!"

Steve jumps a little, but his face is carefully blank as he stares at Billy. "That was quite the fucking outburst," Steve says. And he doesn't look defensive. He's planting his feet, Billy thinks, a little hysteric at the edges. He's planting his fucking feet, of course he fucking is. Steve's hands are loose at his sides and his eyes are dark and he's not defensive, he doesn't think he has anything to defend against.

Billy feels that prickle again, but it's more like a blister now, sharp, obscene.

He's never lost the taste for a good fucking fight. "If you can't trust me with your secrets then what's the fucking *point*?" Billy snaps. He



spreads his arms out wide to either side of himself. "What's the fucking point of all this?"

"You wouldn't *understand*, Billy, so don't fucking pretend I'm keeping secrets from you because I don't *trust* you--"

"How do you *know that*?" Billy demands. It's ripped out of him, his voice too loud for this time of the night. He's yelling, all of the sudden, anger and something like hurt making his throat ache, "How the *fuck* do you know that I wouldn't understand?"

Steve's mouth snaps shut. "Because," Steve says finally, his voice quiet, a little dangerous, deliberate. "Because I just *do*." Steve's wearing his anger on his face when he sets his jaw and grinds out, "How could you possibly fucking understand?"

Billy grits his teeth. "You don't know that I won't understand because you won't tell me--"

"And I'm not fucking *going to*," Steve cuts him off. "So drop it."

When he was little, Billy used to watch cartoons. They all had the same fucking shtick about a popped balloon. It would get a hole in it and then zoom frantically around the room before dropping to the floor. In that moment, Steve's *drop it* echoing in his ears, Billy feels like one of those balloons, devoid of air or motion and the promise of either.

"You're--" Billy says, slow, quiet, "You're just not ever going to tell me what happened to you?"

"No," Steve says simply.

Oh.

The way he says it reminds Billy of that fight at the Byers house all those fucking years ago. He can hear the echo of their voices over the sudden rushing sound in his ears. He remembers his own desperate anger, wired, out of control. He remembers Steve's cool cruelty. *Get out*, Steve had said that night. Billy hears his *no* and thinks he might have preferred a *get out*, instead. Then, Steve had been hiding his fear. Now he's just keeping his fucking secrets.

Billy thinks for one stupid, horrible second that he's going to cry. He pushes that urge down, swallows around the taste of salt at the back of his throat. He focuses instead on the anger, white hot in his veins.

"*Fuck you,*" Billy spits out. In that moment, he fucking *means it*. "You can sleep on the fucking couch."

Billy gets some small pleasure out of the way Steve's eyes go wide, at the silence that greets Billy's words. They've had fights before, a hundred of them, but they have never--not *once*--kicked each other out of bed. That's changing right the fuck now, because Billy's fucking *done*.

Steve's shoulders hunch, then. He looks small standing there in the yellow glow of the hallway light. Steve crosses his arms over his chest, defensive now, even if he wasn't before. Billy's *fuck you* hangs heavy in the air between them. Steve can't hide how much it's hurt him, not when he looks so small. Billy doesn't care. He *doesn't*. Steve is *wrong* and Steve doesn't *trust him* and if Steve doesn't trust him, then how can Billy ever believe that Steve--

Yeah.

Steve can sleep on the *fucking sidewalk* for all Billy cares at this point. "I'm fucking going back to bed," Billy says when Steve doesn't say anything else. Billy walks away from him, leaves Steve standing there with his big fucking bambi eyes and flushed cheeks.

Billy slams the door to the bedroom so hard that he hears a picture frame hit the ground and shatter.

Good. That feels about fucking *right*.

## 2. II: Hawkins

Until he'd gotten together with Steve, Billy had spent every morning since right around fifteen waking up feeling like this. Angry. Hurt. Mean in spite of it, maybe mean because of it. He's spent most mornings since he was fifteen feeling like whatever came next wasn't up to him to decide, never knowing what insignificant thing would condemn him in his father's eyes, and later--after high school--in the eyes of whatever cop he'd mouthed off to. And the weight of that uncertainty--it had wrecked him. It had wrecked him for all those years, had left him broken and twisted and ugly and *mean*. He'd been pretty young when he figured out the secret to surviving: being angry is so much easier than being afraid.

The morning after the fight, Billy wakes up alone in their bed and it's like no time has gone by since then. Like he is fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Like he is in his small room in California, his sparse room in Hawkins, the floor of someone else's apartment in Chicago with a split lip and a shiner. His body remembers what it is to feel afraid and his body remembers how to twist that fear into something more productive.

It burns white-hot in his veins. He feels it burrow into every single inch of him.

He's so fucking *angry*. He could cry from it, should cry from it, probably, might find release, but he doesn't want release and he doesn't want to feel sad. Sad isn't *easy*, hurt isn't *easy*. Neither have ever helped him through a single fucking thing.

Billy stares up at the ceiling and knows that there's a wall and a door between him and Steve. Between the source of all of the things he doesn't want to deal with. He needs out of this fucking apartment. He needs out right fucking now.

He dresses even though he has hours until he needs to be at the shop. He just can't be here anymore.

Billy has to step around the shattered picture frame in order to get to the door. He doesn't even hesitate before he walks over it, holding his

shoes in his hand. The mess will irritate Steve. That Billy didn't clean it up will irritate him more. Billy doesn't care, that's what he tells himself. He hopes it irritates him. Hopes it feels like an itch he can't scratch.

Billy has to walk by the couch, too. There, he hesitates, can't help the way he peers over the back of it to see Steve. Needs to see him, even though he's angry. Just needs to.

Steve is sleeping curled up, a too-thin throw blanket half on the floor. On an ordinary morning, Billy would stop to adjust it because the living room is *freezing* and Steve must be, too.

Of course, on an ordinary morning, Steve would be in bed with him.

Billy doesn't try to fix the blanket and Steve stays asleep--or he stays pretending to be asleep. It doesn't matter. Billy shuts the door behind him quietly and jogs down the stairs.

Outside, it isn't much warmer. Billy lights a cigarette as he walks. When he exhales, the smoke hovers in front of him before the breeze snatches it away. Billy thinks of the joint he and Steve had shared on the fire escape in the last rays of sunlight--god, had it only been a few days ago? That had been a warm May evening, but it's morning now and it's fucking cold. The wet kind of cold, the biting kind. Billy shivers as he walks, as he breathes out smoke. He's thinking about how warm the apartment is. About the press of Steve's skin against his own when they tangle together under their blankets. About how easy it is, slotting all their broken edges together to make something a little bit softer.

Billy's breath stutters. He tastes salt in the back of his throat. He swallows hard, sets his jaw, and thinks about all the windows lighting up as he walks past them, all the people inside them who turn the lights on when they wake up, who don't leave them on all night, all the people who aren't afraid of the *dark* like *children*.

There's that anger, he thinks, bitter, a little relieved. It's easier to feel angry because *he* loves Steve. He loves Steve so much that Steve knows every single detail, every nightmare, every scar, but Steve won't share his fucking ghosts. Keeps them secret.

Billy ends up in a park near their apartment, his knees pulled to his chest and his head tipped back as he smokes on a bench. It's so quiet in the city. He can't keep his fingers still. He drums them on his knees, closes his eyes and opens them again. Billy wishes people were out, wishes there were kids playing, dogs running around. Anything that could fucking distract him would be better than this, better than the burning anger that makes Billy feel as though he is being eaten alive.

Billy wonders if Steve is awake yet. He wonders if he's worried. Usually when Billy leaves early, he leaves a note for Steve to explain, to tell him to have a good day, to tell him he lo--

Not today. Billy thinks about the way they'd both gone silent in the moments after his *fuck you*. He can still taste the words, feel them on his tongue. That had been cutting, mean. He'd fucking meant it to be.

He wonders why he can't stop wondering about Steve.

The anger is acidic at the back of Billy's throat, but it's better than the salty heat of oncoming tears or the tight anxiety of fear, so he lets it burn there. He's not good with secrets. Not with keeping them and especially not with them being kept from him. He hates not knowing. He's always hated it, but now this stupid fucking secret is right in front of their faces, asking to be told, and neither of them have had a good night's sleep in days and it's just--it's still a *secret* and it shouldn't be. Billy thinks he should get to fucking know. He should be given the chance to fucking *understand*.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that he's angry because he's *hurt* and that he feels wild with it because he's not used to being hurt like this. Admitting it--even to himself--doesn't help. Billy fucking let Steve in. Billy sat on his counter and Steve tried to put frozen corn on his bruises and Billy let him in and Steve doesn't--he doesn't trust him, so how can Billy--how can he believe that Steve--

Billy feels reckless, wired. Feels cracked and splintered, wants to inflict that kind of damage on someone else, like maybe that'll make him hurt less. He wants to *fight*. He wants to shout and scream and throw punch after punch and it makes him feel rotten, guilty.

He's a little bit afraid, if he's honest, of what would have happened if he'd stayed at home until Steve woke up. Of what he'd do next. Billy thinks of his fingers tight around Max's wrist, her wide eyes, of Steve--Harrington, then--sprawled bleeding beneath him, face swelling. Billy thinks that he'd thought he was *better than that* now, but fuck. He's not better. He's not even splintered. He's broken. He's always been broken. What was he fucking thinking, trying to have more, to be more. He wonders if he'd felt safe too soon, if this is the moment that ruins everything, that sends him back to his father's house with his tail between his fucking legs.

"Motherfucker," Billy snarls. He sags on the bench and puts his face in his hands.

He spends thirty restless minutes in the park before his wallowing is interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

Billy looks up to see a man in a suit. It's expensive. Billy's spent enough time with Mr. and Mrs. Harrington now to know what an expensive suit looks like. In his hand, the man is holding something that Billy dimly recognizes as one of those Nokia phones, the ones that cost thousands of dollars, that you can use anywhere.

Billy almost says *you're excused* and tells the guy to fuck right off. Instead he snaps, "What?" Billy's not seventeen anymore, but he's still angry. He can still bare his teeth, flash his sharp edges, scare people away.

"Are you--are you Billy, by any chance?" the man asks him.

"Fuck off," Billy says then, because a guy in a fancy suit who's asking for him by name can only be bad news.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. It's only--I was walking through the park and I got the strangest call asking for you."

Billy blinks at him. "What the fuck?"

"You're a very vulgar young man!" the man says, but he's almost smiling. "And I must say, normally I wouldn't approach strangers, but

it was the strangest thing and I just--well it's so interesting! I have her on the phone, if you'd like to talk to her."

"The fuck?" Billy says.

"She says her name is El? I imagine it's short for Eleanor. Such a beautiful name, but a mouthful for these young modern girls, I suppose. Hence the nickname, I'm sure."

Billy doesn't know if he wants to laugh or cry. He does know he wants to take the phone call, though. Billy stands up and holds his hand out, takes the Nokia contraption. He offers a gruff *thanks* to the beaming, kind of awkward man in a suit.

"What the fuck?" Billy says into the phone.

"I snooped," El says into his ear, her voice crackles over the bad connection. Billy can picture the smile she must be wearing. "You're *mad*. And--" she pauses and Billy can picture the look on her face exactly, "Oh," she says, very soft. "You're sad."

Billy feels a little hysterical, listening to some teenager tell him how he feels. It's weird to hear it said out loud when he's trying to hard to pretend it's not fucking happening. El, he knows, understands in a way other people don't. El knows this kind of anger, and she shouldn't, Jesus no fucking kid should have to know what Billy and El know, the kind of--

Billy shakes his head. "I'm mad," he says.

"Sad, too," El answers, a little insistent.

"Yeah," Billy says. "Yeah, kid. I am."

"And Steve is sad. That's not acceptable."

Steve always jokes all the kids have favorites, and mostly they do, but El's always walked an even line right down the middle of them. In a push, Billy's pretty sure she would take his side. "I would," she says, and Billy rolls his eyes at her, is pretty sure she'll feel the sentiment of it if she's snooping this much. "But only if you were right."

"I'm right this time, kid."

"You don't understand," she says instantly. She knows, then. The full extend of what's got him mad and both of them sad.

"I am so sick of hearing that," Billy says. "When no one will fucking *give me a chance.*"

There's a pause. "James is right," she says and before Billy can ask who James is she says, "You're very vulgar."

That makes Billy smile. He scrubs a hand through his hair. "Sorry," he says. "I'm sorry."

"You should talk to him again. He'll tell you."

"How do you know that? Fortune telling isn't usually in your arsenal."

"Steve is scared," El says. "Braver with you, but scared. He'll tell you. Maybe not right away, but when he's ready. He's scared."

"Why would he be scared?"

"That you will think he's crazy. That you'll think he's too much."

Billy wants to scream that that's not fair, that Steve should trust him, that it isn't *fair* that he's not even giving Billy the chance, but he doesn't have to scream it because El knows what he wants to scream. "It isn't fair," El agrees, her voice gone quiet. "It takes time, Billy," she reminds him. "Like you needed. He needs time."

"He's had a year and a half," Billy says, feeling tired.

"Some people need more time. I needed more time."

"I thought friends don't lie?" Billy asks. He can hear the hurt in his own voice with the question, doesn't have the energy to be embarrassed by it. She'd know, anyway. "He's lying."

"He isn't," El says. "He's just not telling. Yet."



Billy exhales heavily through his nose. He can't expect a teenager to solve all his problems, no matter how hard she always tries. "I miss you," he says, because he does and he says the things he means now, even when they're sappy, even when his dad would have called them weak. "Come to Chicago."

Even through the shitty connection, he can hear the smile in her voice. "Soon," she promises. "Say thank you to James. Saying thank you is a rule." She hangs up.

Billy pulls the phone away from his ear and looks at it for a second. He looks at James, who is smiling at him and seems like a nice guy in an expensive suit, if a little nosey. He'd listened to the whole conversation like it was a good tv soap. "Thanks," Billy says, because he doesn't want El to be pissed at him for being rude. Because he doesn't break as many rules these days.

"Of course," James says. "It was just the *strangest thing*, her call, but wonderful. I hope she helped you with whatever you're struggling with, Billy."

Billy nods. James smiles. Then he pockets his phone and walks away.

Billy glances down at his watch. It's still too early to go to work, really, but he's restless so he heads there anyway. He wanders back through the park, down the city blocks, to the shop. He throws himself into work because it's easy and productive and it stops the hurt, mostly.

~

Billy pushes the door to the apartment open slowly. He's back late. Way later than he should be. An old Camaro came in and Billy hadn't been able to resist working on it, staying after hours to get it up and running. It had been nice, being so sure he could fix something.

Steve is sitting on the couch when Billy walks in. His back is straight, rigid, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped at his chin. The tv is on in the background, too quiet for him to be watching it, a sign that it hasn't been a good day. Billy wonders if he went to work or if he's been sitting on the couch jittering his knee like that all day.

Billy drops his keys and his wallet in the little green bowl by the door, toes off his boots, and walks across the room. He sits down on the coffee table directly in front of Steve so that their knees are almost--but not quite--touching.

Steve doesn't move, doesn't shift his gaze from whatever space on the wall he's been staring at for however long he's been staring at it. His voice is carefully blank when he says, "I thought you weren't going to come back."

"That's not fair," Billy says, keeps his voice even. Billy comes back, hasn't given Steve a reason to think otherwise is a long fucking time.

"You made me sleep on the couch," Steve says and his voice is still carefully empty. Billy wants to touch him.

"Yeah that--," Billy admits. "That wasn't fair either." He still doesn't move to touch Steve. He wants to explain himself. He wants to try. "You're--the secrets. It makes me feel--"

It's been a long time since Billy felt like there was anything he couldn't say to Steve, and yet he's sitting here, staring at his boyfriend who doesn't trust him, and he thinks that he doesn't know if he can say what he's feeling. It's--it's scary, is what it is. The ground is uneven, unknown under Billy's feet. The space between the two of them seems suddenly impassable, like he doesn't even know what a *bridge* is, let alone how to cross one, how to meet Steve in the middle and fall back into place. "It makes me feel--" Billy hesitates again. Still, Steve doesn't look at him. *Cards on the table*, Billy thinks. He's all in. He's been all in since the first time they kissed.

--like you don't trust me," Billy finishes, finally. He wants to look away, afraid of the emotion on his face, but he doesn't. He stares at Steve's when he says it, even if Steve won't look back at him. "I was mad," he adds when Steve doesn't say anything. "But it's because I was--" *hurt* he can't quite bring himself to say. That feels too vulnerable, that feels like too much, because if Steve doesn't trust him--which, he's not exactly arguing the point, honestly, so that doesn't feel great for Billy--then it's hard for Billy to really believe he--to really believe he--

Billy has been biting that thought off at the end since the fight last night, but he can't seem to stop it now: if Steve doesn't trust him then Billy can't believe Steve loves him.

It's that fucking simple.

Trust and love are one in the goddamn same. So he can't tell Steve that he was mad because he was hurt, because if Steve doesn't trust him--if he doesn't--if he doesn't--

Fuck.

Steve still isn't looking at him. Billy wonders if that's his fucking answer. "Steve," Billy says, a little desperate. "Come on."

"I thought--" Steve starts, his voice breaking, "That you weren't going to come back." Steve still won't look at him though, won't meet his gaze, just keeps staring at the wall while Billy's sitting *right there*, right in front of him, trying his goddamn best.

The chasm between them opens wider and Billy wonders what will happen if it swallows him whole, wonders if there's anything left here to salvage. Billy drags his tongue across his lower lip and drums his fingers on his knees. "Harrington," he says. "*Steve*." It's more than half a plea, as vulnerable as Billy can let himself be when Steve *won't even look at him*. Maybe doesn't love him.

Billy watches Steve swallow hard, watches him swipe at his eyes, staring straight ahead. Steve's voice is hoarse when he finally says, "It's fine. It's whatever. Let's just watch tv." He grabs the clicker and turns the volume up, effectively ending the conversation.

Billy wants to say he's the one who's been hurt, here. He wants to say *this conversation isn't over until I say it's over*, but that sounds like something his dad would have said, so he doesn't say it.

Billy sits there on the coffee table, blinking at him, but still Steve doesn't meet his eyes. Steve stares straight ahead, blinking too fast--Billy can see his eyes go a little bit red at the edges. But Steve doesn't speak, doesn't look at him. Just sits there, blinking back tears with the corners of his mouth pulled down. Swiping at his eyes every now

and again, like that's going to hide the tears.

Billy wants to tear his own hair out of his head. Steve isn't going to tell him. Steve doesn't trust him. The weight of that is--is too much. It cracks Billy right in fucking two.

So that's it, then.

Billy gets up, but it's not like there's anywhere else to go. He sits back down.

He sits back down on the couch next to Steve and he hates himself for it, for how fucking weak he is, because he knows the truth now and he still he reaches out and puts an arm around Steve and still Steve leans into his side and still they both put their feet up on the coffee table because that's how they sit and Billy doesn't know what else to do with his body but that, because it's so automatic and Billy's thoughts are buzzing blur of white noise.

Billy, with his arm around Steve on their couch, thinks that Steve still hasn't looked him in the face, not once since he walked in the door. He thinks about El's advice, her insistence that Steve will be ready and then he thinks no, probably not. Steve isn't ever going to tell him. Billy breathes in deep, the smell of Steve's shampoo and just the smell of *him* familiar enough to sting. He thinks that it doesn't matter if Steve doesn't trust him or love him. Billy will stay until he's kicked out. Billy can't imagine choosing to leave this.

Eventually, Steve falls asleep. Billy feels his breathing even out. It's not even that late, yet, and Billy hasn't eaten, but Billy gets an arm around him, half carries and half drags a half asleep Steve into the bedroom. He crawls into bed with him, pulls Steve tight into his chest, falls asleep with his nose buried in Steve's hair.

~

They don't talk about it the next morning and Steve's still mostly avoiding his gaze, even as they make coffee and eat breakfast and ask each other when they plan to get home from work that day. It's amazing, Billy thinks, how fucking normal this can feel when they're essentially not talking.

It's a long fucking day.

Billy goes to work and he thinks about the fight. Some woman with an accent that says *money* yells at him about a scratch that was already on her car and he grits his teeth and thinks about the fight. Billy leaves work and takes the long way home that night. It's late and he walks. He doesn't go home. He walks and he smokes and he thinks about the fucking fight.

The thing is, he's pretty sure he's not wrong. Billy's hurt and it makes him want to hurt something and he doesn't know what to do with that, with that long dormant urge to break things when something doesn't go his way. It makes him think of his dad, which makes Billy feel sick to his stomach.

Billy sucks in a breath and digs around in his pocket for some quarters and practically runs to the first payphone he sees.

"Do you know why he won't fucking tell me?" Billy asks when someone finally picks up. He leans his arm against the top of the phone.

Nancy's voice, when she speaks, is careful and measured. "Why do you need to know so badly?" she asks.

"Because I want to *help him*," Billy says and it's more sad and less angry than he wants it to be. He lets his head fall forward, rests it against his forearm and breathes out. "I just want to fucking help him when he wakes up like that."

"You were awful the other night," Nancy says, which isn't an answer. "It didn't seem like you were worried about helping then, Billy."

"I'm sorry," Billy says, thinking of what he'd said to her when he'd snatched the phone from Steve. He feels like a child, all of the sudden, which is what Steve had accused him of being. "I was--" Billy pauses. "Fuck, Nance. I was jealous."

"Were you?" There's something like a smile in her voice. "I didn't notice."

Billy laughs. "Shit," he says.

“Apology accepted,” Nancy says, “Of course, Billy. You don’t owe me an apology.” She pauses, “You say you want to help him,” Nancy adds. “Be there for him. You don’t need to know what he’s screaming about to do that.”

Billy drums his fingers on the phone in his hand. “What did he tell you about the fight?” He’s wondering if she can tell him how to keep his shit together, which isn’t fair.

“You fought?” Nancy says.

Billy thinks of Steve trying to tell him that he was going to Hawkins for Easter. He thinks of Steve trying to tell him that he could stay with him after that first Christmas, when Billy had shown up in Hawkins. These are old memories, but they’re some of their most spectacular fights, too, and Billy remembers how Steve could never quite say what he wanted to, how Billy always lost his shit because of it, always jumping to the wrong conclusion. Billy had really thought they were better than that, but if they’re fighting and Steve isn’t telling Nancy about it, then maybe they aren’t better than that. Maybe they’re still figuring their shit out.

If they’re fighting because Steve can’t quite say something and Billy can’t quite handle that, then they’re just--it’s just them and their shit. Same as it ever was. Billy’s such a fucking idiot. Steve’s not off the hook, either, he thinks, but they could both do better.

“Billy?” Nancy says. “You still there? What fight?”

“Yeah I am. We fought,” Billy answers. “I think we’re still fighting. I gotta go. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“All right,” Nancy says. She sounds confused, but like she’s trying to hide it. “Say hi to Steve for me.”

Billy hangs up the phone and just sort of looks at the street around him. It’s been dark for hours. It’s nearly ten at night and Billy’s been fucking around at work and trying to stay out of the house until Steve goes to bed, but that’s avoiding the fucking problem.

He has to fucking go home.

~

Steve is asleep when Billy finally makes it home, there's no sound in the apartment at all when he's toeing off his boots by the door or throwing down his jacket. The lights in the apartment are off out in the living room, but when Billy pushes open the bedroom door Steve is curled up in bed, back against the wall with his hair flopping over his forehead. Every single light in the bedroom is turned on. It's so bright that it's jarring. Billy stands in the doorway and watches Steve sleep, the rise and fall of his chest, the softness on his face.

Slowly, silently, Billy walks around the room. He turns off all the lights but the one near the bed. He kicks off his jeans--Steve has a thing about *street clothes* in the bed because even after all these goddamn years he's still a fucking *princess*--and trades them for a pair of sweats and a clean henley. He sits down on the edge of their bed and reaches out, cards his fingers through Steve's hair. Steve makes a soft, sleepy sound, but when Billy does it again his eyes blink open.

"What's it?" Steve mumbles.

Billy leans down and kisses Steve's cheek, the corner of his eye, brushes their lips together. Steve's mouth opens for him and Billy drags his tongue across Steve's. "Hi," Billy says softly, shifting a little to bump their noses together.

"Billy," Steve says, sounding exhausted. "I have work early." He starts to turn away, but when Billy presses a palm to his cheek and kisses him again, he stops. Billy pushes closer, feels Steve scooting towards him, feels something like relief wash over him.

"I'm sorry," Billy whispers against Steve's mouth. Steve does pull away, then, blinks at him.

"Billy--"

"Don't," Billy says, sitting back up. He gives Steve a moment to sit up in bed and then they're both sitting with their backs against the headboard, not quite touching. Steve's looking at him, though, for the first time in what feels like a thousand years. "I didn't fucking get it. When you said that I wouldn't understand. I still don't get it, but I

was a dick and there's not--I don't have a good reason for that." *He's scared*, El had said. Billy's scared too. Steve is tense and quiet beside him, worrying at his lip with his teeth. Billy wants to touch him, but still he doesn't. "Are you--"

"I'm fine," Steve answers before Billy can finish. "Are you?"

"Yeah." No.

"Are we all right?" Steve asks.

Are they? Billy isn't sure. It hasn't fucking felt like they're all right. Not since they fought, but he knows more than fucking anything that he wants them to be okay. Billy goes for honest even though it scares him. Steve is scared, that's what El had said, maybe he needs to know that Billy's pretty fucking scared, too. "I shouldn't have called you a mess," Billy says, "and I shouldn't have hung up on Nancy," he says, "And I shouldn't have kicked you out of bed."

Steve reaches for Billy's hand. Billy lets him take it and Steve presses a kiss to his palm. "I don't--Billy, I don't know how to tell you what happened to me," he says, voice soft. "That's the truth."

"You don't trust me," Billy says, feels heat creeping back into his voice. He's so fucking frustrated and he wishes he wasn't, but just hearing it again--it isn't just jealousy, it's hurt, too, and it makes him fucking *mad*. "You don't trust me," he says again, bitter. "I wouldn't understand."

"I do trust you," Steve says, playing with Billy's fingers. "But there's like--there's like government contracts and El needs to be kept secret and it's just a lot."

Billy blinks. "Government contracts?" he asks. He shouldn't have fucking bothered, he realizes. Shit. "At least take me fucking seriously," Billy snaps and then he tries to pull his hand back. Steve's fingers lock tight around his.

"Billy," Steve says. "You've seen what she can do. You have to fucking believe that shit isn't--that people must *know* about her. Government people. To keep her safe there's a lot of secrets, all right?"



This is one of them.”

“Not from me,” Billy says and now he’s embarrassed because the hurt is so fucking obvious in his voice. He doesn’t have enough fucking anger in him to hide it when he says, “You don’t--you can’t keep secrets from me.”

Steve kisses his palm again and then drops Billy’s hand, scoots closer, gets a palm on his cheek and turns Billy to face him. He kisses him so slowly that Billy can’t help the way he leans into it, melts into it, goes pliant because when Steve kisses him it’s like--it’s like Billy’s whole world goes right on it axis. That’s how it always feels, like Billy’s been in freefall and then Steve catches him. Like Billy is *home* and Steve *means it*.

Steve breaks the kiss to catch Billy’s gaze. He doesn’t look away when he says, “I keep this secret. Just this one, Billy,” and he doesn’t look away when Billy has to shut his eyes because of the heat behind them, because he’s not going to fucking cry about this. Steve tugs Billy until they’re both lying down. He pulls the covers up over them and tosses his leg over Billy and throws his arm around him and tucks his face into Billy’s neck.

“I love you,” Steve says, and then he says it again, and again, and again, and again. Billy falls asleep to that soft litany, to Steve’s breath against his skin.

Billy decides the next morning that he doesn’t want to lose this, that he had come so fucking close to it, that it had been him who’d done it and not Steve. He doesn’t want to lose this and so the fight--the secret--it sort of fizzles out between them. It’s easy, because the nightmares stop, because there are no more stories in the newspaper about the doctor, no similar murders, no--nothing. It just goes away. All of it.

It bothers Billy, sometimes, if he thinks about it too hard, this one secret that Steve keeps from him. So his solution is just that he doesn’t fucking think about it. The nightmares stop. It’s not hard to push it to the back of his brain and focus on something else.

~

Mid-June brings wet, sticky heat to Chicago in unending waves of what Steve calls misery and Billy calls paradise. He loves the hot weather, loves the way the whole city smells like sun-baked asphalt, even now, hours after dark as they both stumble home a little tipsy from the bar.

Billy likes their neighborhood. He likes that it's quiet and empty after midnight, for the most part. There are a few other stragglers, but mostly it's just them, the sounds of their footsteps on the sidewalk, a rhythm that's familiar and soothing.

"Dustin was right," Steve is complaining, the back of his hand brushing up against Billy's as they walk. He won't let Billy throw an arm around his shoulders because he's *sweaty*. "You're a psychopath. I should have listened."

Billy rolls his eyes. "While I would never question the diagnosis of a teenager, I might need a little more to work with, here."

"You like this heat!" Steve exclaims. "God, it's disgusting. I'm so hot. *Ugh*."

"Stop whining," Billy says. "The cold is miserable. Heat is the best." Steve shoves him and Billy pretends to fall, lands on his ass on the ground and blinks up at Steve, does his best to look wounded and sad. "Ouch!" he says. "I think it's broken!"

"Your brain?" Steve asks. "I fucking agree," but he still leans over and offers Billy his arm. Billy pulls himself to his feet and they stand there for a second, eyes locked, inches between them, both smiling. The air is hot and miserable and Steve is the most beautiful thing Billy has ever touched, the best thing he has ever called his own.

It's been a good week.

"I love you," Billy says, delights in the way Steve's cheeks flush. He still doesn't say it much, not out loud, but it feels important to say it now, bickering about the fucking weather, both a little buzzed on beer. "I just really fucking love you, Harrington."

"I just called you a psychopath," Steve breathes out, cheeks still red,

lips parted. “And you love me?”

“I do,” Billy promises. “Even if you like the cold, ugh, what the fuck, Harrington.”

They don’t kiss, then, but Billy uses the grip he still has on Steve’s arm to pull him in. It’s quiet in their neighborhood, dark where they’re standing. Billy pulls him in and wraps his arms around Steve and Steve just fucking melts into it, steps into Billy’s space like it’s his own, presses his face into Billy’s shoulder. Billy slides his fingers through Steve’s hair and ducks his head to press closer. Steve’s taller, there’s an awkward curve to his shoulders, but it’s still a long time before they move.

“You’re right,” Billy says. “You are sweaty.”

“Fuck you!” Steve says and then--Billy watches it happen, his whole face shuts down, he goes a little pale, wide-eyed.

They haven’t actually said *fuck you*, not even in jest, since the night of the fight. Billy’s still close enough that he reaches out, trails fingertips along Steve’s jaw, pulls gently until Steve’s looking at him. “I love you,” Billy says again, firm, unyielding.

“Wow, you’re saying it twice in one night?” Steve jokes, but it falls flat. He closes his eyes. “I love you too,” he says, nearly a whisper. Billy’s heart aches. He gives Steve a second before speaking again.

“So what do you think about going to that show?” Billy asks, nudging Steve so they’re both walking.

“Sure,” Steve says, sighing his relief at the change in subject. “I liked that one song we heard tonight. Adam said the tickets would be cheap, too.”

Billy pulls at his t-shirt, flapping it around to get some air on his chest as they walk. “Sounds good.”

They’re still about five minutes from home and Billy’s sleepy, but he might take a shower. He doesn’t really see the point because he’s just going to get sweaty again, but the idea of climbing into bed this sticky makes him want to die.

“Can we shower before we go to sleep?” he says.

“You need my permission to shower now?”

“No I mean together, dipshit.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Steve says, shrugging, but he’s smiling.

“Wow, I really appreciate the enthusiasm. Maybe I’ll just get myself off--”

“Can I watch?”

Billy rolls his eyes and Steve’s looking at him with those big stupid brown eyes, and it’s *very distracting*. So that’s probably why they’re both so caught off guard.

Something runs out in front of them, close enough that it makes Billy jump.

Steve doesn’t jump. What he does when the thing runs out in front of them is grab a fistful of Billy’s tshirt. He yanks Billy back so hard Billy stumbles at the force of it, hears his shirt tear, ends up behind Steve. Steve has an arm thrown out in front of Billy, now, like he’s protecting him from something. Steve has an arm thrown out in front of Billy and he makes this strange, scared, angry sound. He steps directly between Billy and whatever it is--

It’s a dog. “Harrington, it’s just a fucking dog,” Billy says, trying to get his balance back, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on. It’s a big dog, but it’s *just a dog*. It stops and stares at them, growls. Billy wonders if they’re about to get bitten by a dog in the middle of the fucking night, but then it runs off.

Steve’s still standing there, his arm out in front of Billy, staring where the dog was. His shoulders are heaving, but other than that he doesn’t move at all. His fingers are shaking. “Jesus,” Billy says. He steps up behind Steve once he’s sure the street is empty, presses his chest to Steve’s back. He hooks his arm over Steve’s shoulder, pressing his palm over Steve’s heart. He can feel Steve breathing too hard, his arm rising and falling with the stuttering movement of Steve’s chest. “Hey,” Billy says. “It was just a dog. Breathe. Easy.”

Steve sags back against him, tips his head back until his temple rests against Billy's cheek. "Home," Steve says. The way he melts into Billy now is different from earlier. Billy feels a lot more like he's holding Steve up. "Can we go home?"

"Yeah," Billy says, pressing a quick kiss to the side of Steve's head. "Yeah, sweetheart. Of course we can." He shifts a little bit, nudging Steve off him. This time, when Billy throws what he hopes looks like a friendly arm over Steve's shoulders to walk, Steve doesn't shove him off.

Five minutes has never felt so long, but then they're stumbling through the door of their apartment. It's hot in here, too, almost stifling, but Billy's barely got the door closed before Steve's shoving him up against it, pressing hot, open mouthed kisses along Billy's throat.

He drops his hands to Billy's jeans, fumbling with them, and Billy lets out a breathy sigh before he catches Steve's wrists. "We've done the distracting me with sex thing before," Billy reminds him. "C'mere, stupid," and he gets his arms around Steve, pulls them both down to the floor, and for a second Steve twists in his grip, says, "Fuck, Billy, come on," but then he just sags, just collapses into Billy, mostly in his lap. He presses his face into Billy's neck, and Billy thinks for a second that Steve might cry, but he doesn't.

"You want to tell me what that was about, Harrington?" Billy asks after a while, when his spine starts to hurt from the way it's pressed up against the door.

He feels like they're back to square one when Steve says, "No." When Steve says. "You wouldn't understand."

Billy fights down the anger, wants to be what Steve needs, wants to show he understands this, at least, Steve's need for secrecy. "Okay," Billy says, voice quiet. "Okay. Do you uh, do you want to--call Nancy?"

He feels Steve shake his head. "Let's shower," Steve says. "You wanted to shower. And then we can go to bed?"

Billy nods, waits for Steve to get up first, accepts the hand that Steve offers to tug Billy to his feet. Steve doesn't have a nightmare that night, but he doesn't need to have one to confirm what Billy's been dreading since they'd had the fight. Whatever the secret is, its effect on Steve isn't going anywhere.

They're going to have to talk about it, Billy thinks. When Steve's ready. El had said he would be, eventually. Billy is trying to be patient. Steve doesn't fucking make it easy, though.

He watches Steve sleep, the softness of his face, the ease of it, and Billy hopes that Steve can tell him soon because Steve is starting to look a little bit like he's falling apart.

~

July is hot and wet and miserable and Billy *loves it*. It reminds him of California. It makes him feel like he's thawing out. They get to be outside all the time. They go to every one of the parks around the city. They sit on fire escapes. They even go back to Hawkins for the fourth, just to see if Hopper can manage to kill anyone with a firework this year.

They're out at the quarry, all of them, and it's been a while since Billy's been back to Hawkins, but he's glad that he came. Steve is pressed against his side on a blanket and the ground is rocky and a little hard and even though the sun has set, Steve is still sweating a bit through his t-shirt, is a little sticky against Billy's side. It's the best Billy's felt in such a long fucking time. Billy doesn't let go, he keeps one arm around him, drinks his beer with the other, and laughs himself silly as Lucas chases a screeching Dustin around with a sparkler.

Dustin is fucking *terrified* of them for some reason. Watching him run and Lucas give chase is adding no less than five years to Billy's life. It's that fucking good.

Max and Will wander over. "I thought you were on firework patrol," Billy says.

"Joyce is going to light them," Max says, dropping down on the

blanket next to Billy. Will settles down near her. "Which means she's going to let Hopper do it so that she can laugh at him and we're all probably going to die."

"We've had good lives," Will says, thoughtful. "I mean, besides all the--" he waves his hand around. "You know."

Billy doesn't know. He doesn't mention that fact.

Max reaches out, plucks the beer from Billy's hand and finishes it off in one gulp. She's grinning at Billy over the rim of the can. "Want to see a trick?" she asks.

"Aside from my disappearing fucking beer?" Billy asks. Steve is laughing against his shoulder.

Max grins at him. She whistles a pattern and then tosses the beer can into the air. A few feet over her head it crumples, crushed like it's under a weight into a perfect disc. Max catches it as it falls and then tosses it like a frisbee through the open window of Hopper's truck.

El comes out from behind the trees and Will claps. She and Max take identical bows. Billy snorts out a laugh.

"That was...Uh--Exactly how much beer do you two drink?" Steve says, eyeing them both.

"Normally it is...soda?" El answers, like it's a question.

Billy laughs as Steve covers his eyes, "Nevermind," Steve says, hand still over his face. "I don't want to know."

"You drank a lot of beer in high school too, keg king," Billy reminds him.

"So did you!" Steve protests, shoving at Billy. "If I remember correctly we ended things with *you* as the new king."

"And what a fair and righteous king I was," Billy says solemnly. He squeezes Steve's shoulder. "I can fucking hear you rolling your eyes," Billy adds, but the truth is that Will's laughing into his hand and that gave Steve's eye roll away.

“You did beat the shit out of him,” Dustin calls as he runs by. “How fair and righteous could you have been? Wait! Lucas! Come on, don’t do it, son of a *bitch*!” and then he’s tearing off again, Lucas hot on his heels, sparkler waving in front of him.

Billy goes rigid, remembers the way Steve had gone slack under his fists. Max is still smiling, calls something out to El, and Billy thinks only Steve, still pressed against his side, notices. “Hey,” Steve says, turning, lips close to Billy’s ear. “That was a long time ago and you were an giant asshole. You’re a normal asshole now.” Billy thinks it’s supposed to be a jerk, supposed to be reassuring. Dustin screams bloody murder and in the cover of the sound Billy turns his head to face Steve and says, “I’m sorry,” because he is.

“Me too,” Steve says back, so quietly Billy almost misses it. Billy wonders if they think Steve’s apologizing for the same thing.

Somewhere off in a place where the trees open toward a clearing, Billy hears Joyce howl with laughter. A few seconds later the first firework goes into the air. It does two lazy loops and then plummets into the quarry without exploding. Everyone groans.

Then everyone screams because the firework zooms straight back up and explodes, bright and colorful. From where she’s standing, Billy can see a huge smile spreading across El’s face, her hand out in front of her.

“All right,” Hopper says, and Billy can see him now. There is a *lot* of soot on his face that Billy doesn’t really understand until Joyce comes out too and he can see all of the soot on her hands. “New plan. El is in charge of the fireworks.”

Billy gets to spend that whole evening with these people who took him in when he was at his fucking worst, with Steve plastered to his side and his kid sister stealing sips of his beer. He’s had worse nights in Hawkins.

~

Steve’s parents are out of town. That’s what Billy’s thinking when he wakes up because he hears something downstairs. The clock says it’s



just past 5am. Steve is awake too. His eyes are wide. Billy shifts a little closer, presses a quick kiss to Steve's lips then climbs out of bed.

He hears the sound again and looks around the room for something he can use if he has to fight someone. A plate breaks and the sound makes them both jump. Billy finally settles for a broom that's tucked away in the corner of Steve's bedroom. It's not a bat or a crowbar, both of which he'd prefer, but it'll have to do.

Whatever is downstairs knocks something else over. A weird, wailing sort of noise echoes through the house, then something a little like a squeal. Billy's walking to the door when Steve grabs him by the wrist. His fingers are shaking.

"Don't," Steve says sharply. Billy doesn't understand the desperate fear on his face at all. "Let me go first."

"What?" Billy says, but Steve snatches the broom out of his hand and pushes past him.

They hear the noise again, a sort of squealing, shrieking echo. It makes Billy shiver. Whatever the fuck is down there, it isn't human. Steve moves fast, is halfway down the hall all of the sudden. Billy has to hurry to catch up with him. They creep down the stairs together, darkness all around them. Billy notes, distantly, that Steve doesn't reach out to turn on a light.

"Steve," Billy murmurs, but Steve waves a hand at him for silence. He rounds the corner into the kitchen. The slider to the pool is open and they both stare at it, at the forest just past it, thinking of all the things that could have come inside.

Steve swears under his breath.

Something a little like a small dog darts around behind the island in the darkness. It makes that horrible fucking sound again. Steve runs at it just as Billy turns on the lights.

"Steve," Billy yells, grabbing him by the back of the shirt and yanking him back. Steve's swinging the broom like it's a bat. He catches Billy across the jaw with it, hard, and Billy says, "Fuck, ow," under his

breath, but curls his fingers at Steve's hip and pulls him into his chest. Steve is fucking shaking all over, breathing hard.

"Let go," Steve says, voice low. "Where the fuck is it? Where is it? I have to--"

"Harrington," Billy says. "Steve. Babe. Jesus! Calm the fuck down! It's a fucking fisher cat!"

Billy can see it now, its teeth bared at them. It's standing on a chair, hissing. It makes that awful sound again, like a screech, like it's straight out of hell. Steve's whole body shudders against him. "I--Jesus--I--" Steve stumbles over his words and Billy doesn't know what's happening, not really, but every time that stupid fucking fisher cat makes a sound Steve absolutely *shakes*, makes a small, miserable noise like he does when he has those nightmares and tries to pull himself out of Billy's grip, like he wants to get away.

"Give me the broom," Billy says, needing to do something, and he grabs it out of Steve's hand. He keeps one eye on the stupid fucking thing in case it decides to like, attack them, and then moves slowly toward the sink. He turns the water on, the spray nozzle, and squirts water across the kitchen.

The fisher cat *screams* and then Billy runs at it with the broom, making as much noise as possible. He can actually see the moment it decides whatever food is in the house isn't worth it. It runs right back out the slider and Billy slams it shut, drops the broom and stares through the glass as it disappears into the trees.

Billy's laughing when he turns around. "Jesus Christ," he says. "I don't know which one of us left the slider open, but that was fucking ridiculous." He runs a hand through his hair, still grinning. "Holy shi--" he stops when Steve just kind of drops, just sits down hard on the floor in the kitchen, backs up until his back is pressed against the wall.

"Harrington," Billy says, tripping over his own feet in his rush to get to his side. "Harrington, hey, hey, it's ok. It's gone. I got it out."

Steve's staring at the glass slider, out at the pool, shaking like he's

going to fall to pieces right here. “Steve,” Billy says, confused, concerned. “Hey, babe, look at me. Look at me. Come on.”

But Harrington won’t look at him, doesn’t pull his eyes away from the pool, doesn’t stop shaking. It’s been a long time since Billy’s seen him this bad. Nearly the full year and a half since that first week after he found him. The nightmares are one thing, but panic attacks like this--it’s been a while.

Outside, Billy hears the fisher cat scream. Steve chokes on something like a sob and Billy doesn’t know if he should touch him. “Okay,” he says. “You’re all right. I’m right here. It’s all right.” What the *fuck* is going on? “Hold on, easy. Stay right here. Don’t move--” Steve’s hand shoots out and his fingers lock around Billy’s wrist. “I’m not--I’m not going far, sweetheart. Give me a second, ok?”

Billy doesn’t have any better ideas. Steve lets him go and Billy pushes to his feet, scrambles to the kitchen phone and calls Nancy.

“What the fuck?” Nancy says, mumbled and sleepy in his ear. Karen had to go and get her, wake her up. It feels like it’d taken a thousand years for her to get to the phone. If Billy weren’t freaking the fuck out, he’d make a joke about how her mom still sounds hot, but he’s freaking the *fuck* out.

“You need to talk to Harrington,” Billy says, knows he sounds like he’s panicking.

“What happened?” Nancy asks, clarity flooding her voice as Billy drops back down on the floor next to Steve.

“There’s--we woke up, there was something in the house. It was just a fisher cat, but he’s--Nance, I don’t know what to--”

“The sound,” Nancy says in his ear. “It’s the sound they make.” Her voice sounds impossibly cool when she says it. “I’ve heard them a few times. It’s--” she stops. “I have trouble with it too. Give him the phone. You can uh, you could put music on.”

Billy does as she says, doesn’t linger to see what Nancy says to Steve once he takes the phone from Billy and puts it to his ear. For the first

time in months, Billy doesn't feel a little spike of jealousy at the conversation because he doesn't know what to do and Nancy does, and Billy is so grateful for that.

The first thing he can find is fucking Cyndie Lauper, but he puts it on anyway. Her voice fills the room and Billy turns the volume up and thinks that the Harringtons have too much fucking money and thinks that he doesn't know why he knows every single stupid word to these songs, but he walks back over to Steve and drops down next to him.

Steve looks a little better. He still hasn't spoken, but he's breathing is more normal. When Billy settles against the wall next to him, Steve hands him the phone. "Nancy?" Billy says.

"He's fine," Nancy says. "It just scared him. Listen to some music and then go back to be--is that Cyndie Lauper?"

"No," Billy says. "I would never listen to Cyndie Lauper."

Out of the corner of his eye he can see Steve smile a little. Billy lifts his arm up and Steve scoots closer, tucks himself against Billy's side. Billy drops his cheek onto the top of Steve's head and squeezes. "Liar," Nancy says. "That is definitely Cyndie Lauper. Great choice. It suits you two, I think," and then she sings a few of the lyrics and sounds awful, but Billy says *bye* before he hangs up on her, because he's been rude to Nancy in the past and mostly she's just trying to help.

They listen to Cyndie for a while, sometimes Billy sings along because he really does know all the words, what the fuck, and it reminds him a little bit of high school when he wishes he'd had his shit together enough to know Steve, because they'd lost three years that they could have been together, because Billy thinks that they could have loved each other like this then if he'd only been ready for it.

"I'm tired," Steve mumbles. The sun is starting to rise, the sky getting lighter behind the trees. Billy gets to his feet, holds out a hand to pull Steve up. They go to bed and Billy doesn't ask any questions.

The sky is crackling with heat and the promise of a storm the next morning. Really it's just like, a few hours after they'd gone to bed, but Billy couldn't sleep and he didn't want to wake Steve us tossing and turning. Billy is sprawled on a pool chair in the Harrington's backyard, sipping a cup of coffee and wishing the fucking sun were out. For all his wishing, though, he is greeted over and over and over again with a thick, heavy grey sky, hovering just out of reach.

Billy sips his coffee and thinks about getting into the pool. Thinks about the way the water could swallow him up, turn off sound for a little while. He had left Steve in bed, still sleeping off the night before, but had himself woken up restless and too early, so he sips coffee out back by the pool and frowns at the sky.

It's a relief, in a way, to know that Hawkins feels different than it had before December. Here, it's just--it's just where Steve grew up. A place Billy lived once, but not anymore. It's the morning and Billy wishes he were soft at the edges, something malleable, that he could fit himself to Steve's needs perfectly and without thought, take the shape of him and be--better.

Billy has come to love this house. He's thinking that as he stares up at the sky threatening to break above his head and dump rain on him.

"You never like coffee when you make it," Steve says from somewhere behind him. His voice doesn't startle Billy.

"Yours tastes better," Billy says.

"I would have made it for you."

"You were sleeping. I didn't want to wake you up. You had a long night."

Billy scoots over when he hears Steve come closer, but Steve doesn't try to fit on the lounge next to Billy. He sits on the ground instead, draws his knees up to his chest and wraps his arms around them. Billy hangs a hand off the side of the chair, curls his fingers loosely around the back of Steve's neck, squeezes.

For a while they stare in silence at the pool. It makes Billy think

about their *shit*, as Steve calls it. It makes him think about Barb, who Billy never knew, who died in this pool.

He thinks about their fight. He thinks about hurling that *fuck you* at Steve like a grenade. He thinks about the hurt that had rippled across Steve's face, the anger. It hadn't been like their earliest fights, when Billy had fucked up and hurt Steve, or Steve had fucked up and hurt Billy. Billy had thrown that grenade and Steve had just--had just *taken it*. Billy had waved his arms around and shouted, and Steve's hands had stayed at his sides. He'd kept space between them, kept his voice low and even, hadn't yelled.

At the time, Billy had thought it was because Steve was just that angry, but Billy has seen Steve get angry, get hurt. Has seen him wave his hands around. Has seen him get too close, nose to nose, with someone who made him mad.

*You can't get up in my face*, Billy had told him once, after Steve had explained to Billy in the vaguest details why he freaked out and then had just--had just asked Billy what his own bullshit was, what baggage he carried. Steve had known, then, because Billy's shit was still happening, then, but he'd asked anyway, had allowed Billy the privacy of that one need. *When we're mad at each other. You can't get up in my face.*

It's been nearly two months since the fight and they haven't talked about it. Maybe that's why it's taken Billy this long to figure it out. Steve, quiet voiced in his anger, hands at his sides, away from Billy. Steve, in the face of Billy's yelling rage, going still. Steve, who Billy had told to *back off* in the heat of a fight only once, had never needed to be told twice.

It hadn't been that Steve was so angry he couldn't move, Billy thinks. It had been that Steve loved him so much even in his fucking anger he *wouldn't* move. Because Billy had asked him not to get up in his face when they were mad at each other.

Maybe, Billy thinks, anger is a little too easy. Maybe it isn't as productive as it used to be.

Billy rubs his fingers against the nape of Steve's neck and Steve leans

into it, makes a soft, pleased sound. He shuts his eyes. When Billy turns his head he can see Steve's eyelashes splayed out across his cheeks. "I'm sorry," Billy says. "For the shit I said to you that night."

Steve doesn't ask what night and he doesn't pull away and he doesn't open his eyes. The sky is still heavy with rain above them, the air humid enough to choke. Billy sets the mug of coffee down and runs his hand from the nape of Steve's neck down over the curve of his spine, back up again, his fingertips trailing over the thin fabric of the tshirt Steve's got on.

"Harrington," Billy says, still running his fingers up and down, up and down. "I'd believe you. Anything you say. Whatever it is. I'd believe you."

He feels Steve nod. "I know," he says. "I called Hopper this morning." Billy--thinks that's a little weird. It's not the answer he'd been expecting. "Finish your coffee," Steve says. He stands up, dislodging Billy's hand. He leans over and fits his mouth against Billy's, kisses him with the kind of slow, deep intensity that has Billy pushing up off the lounge for a better angle, for more.

Steve pulls back with a smile, stays close enough that their noses bump. "And then we're going for a drive. I need to show you something."

Billy's intrigued. Steve goes back into the house and Billy gives him a beat before he's scooping up his mug of coffee and heading inside. He dumps what's left of it down the sink--Steve's right, Billy really doesn't enjoy the coffee he brews himself--and wanders upstairs. He's expecting Steve to be in his bedroom, but he isn't. Billy dresses quickly--jeans and a t-shirt, sneakers. He fixes his hair in the mirror. He's walking back down the stairs when he hears a car driving away.

Did Steve fucking go without him?

Billy heads to the window, tries not to look like he's rushing to do it, and pulls the curtain back. It's Hopper's truck, he realizes, watching it disappear around a curve in the road.

Steve's standing there, at the side of the road, where Hopper must

have pulled up. Billy watches as he shoves something into his pocket.

Billy's sitting in the kitchen, trying to look totally nonchalant and like he wasn't staring at him out the window when Steve comes back in. "Hey," Billy says. "Ready?"

He's expecting a yes, he's expecting a kiss, he's expecting a smile. Steve rubs a hand through the hair at the back of his head and shrugs. "Not really," he says. "But we're gonna do it anyway."

"Harrington--"

"Don't," Steve says, but he sounds tired, not angry. "Come on."

Billy follows Steve outside and into one of the cars in the garage. It's a BMW, but newer, nicer than Steve's old one had been. The Harringtons have too much goddamn money, honestly. Billy doesn't even bother trying to ask if he can drive. This is Steve's field trip.

They're well past the center of town when Billy frowns. "Harrington--where are we going?"

Steve runs a hand through his hair again. "I'll explain when we get there," he says, which is vague and honestly a little weird. He falls silent again and Billy looks out the window. "Listen," Steve says, "This is going to be--I might have a tough time when we're there. I don't know." He says it so casually, like he's talking about how green the fucking leaves are, but when Billy looks at him, Steve's grip on the steering wheel is white-knuckled.

"Harrington," Billy says. "You don't have--"

"I want to," Steve says, but it's through gritted teeth. Billy hears the *drop it*. Doesn't need Steve to say it out loud. He goes back to staring out the window as they drive. "The kids used to call this street Mirkwood," Steve says. "I wonder if they still do."

Billy doesn't know what to say to that, what to say to the strange tone in Steve's voice. It's not nostalgic, although it sounds sad, but it's not quite terrified either. It sounds a lot like Steve is trying to distance himself from something. Billy doesn't really understand what.



Eventually, Steve turns. It's down a road that looks like it should be busy, but it's overgrown and messy. Billy leans forward a little in his seat, peering out the windshield. Steve stops when they get to a chain link fence. A sign warns government property, no trespassing.

Steve gets out of the car. Billy doesn't hesitate to follow.

The building behind the fence with the sign is huge, cement. It looks like at some point it was designed to be modern, but it's overgrown, now. Trees and ivy and birds nests all over the place. There's no sign of any humans at all. No cars beyond the fence, no lights on. It takes Billy a second to find a sign that says *Hawkins National Laboratory U.S. Department of Energy* in faded letters.

"Steve?" Billy says, coming to stand next to his boyfriend. Steve is standing just in front of the car, staring up at the building. He's a little pale, his eyes wide.

"I've never seen it when it's green like this," Steve says, voice a little blank. "When the trees were alive, I mean. I've never--"

Billy grabs his hand, weaves their fingers together, squeezes. He wants to ask what it is, but he doesn't, because he's pretty sure that's why Steve brought him here, to explain. Billy waits. He can wait until Steve's ready.

Steve swallows so hard Billy can hear it.

"It looks closed up," Billy says, soft. He's thinking maybe it'll be comforting, that whatever it is looks long dead. "Like locked up."

Steve shakes his head. "Hopper gave me the key," he says. He pulls out of Billy's grip, and Billy has to fight the urge to grab his hand and yank him back, to insist they get into the car and drive back to the Harrington house. Something about the place gives Billy the heebie jeebies, makes him feel like something is crawling slowly up his spine, like something might come out of the shadows, even though the morning is bright and sunny.

Steve digs the key Hopper must have given him out of his pocket. He unlocks the little booth first, where Billy imagines security once

stood. Then he takes another key, a kind of stubby one into the booth with him. Billy watches Steve's face as he turns the second lock.

The gate groans, like it's not used to being open. It happens slowly, the metal whining all the while. By the time it's open, Steve is standing next to him again. Again, Billy grabs his hand. He follows Steve through the gate.

"This is where El grew up," Steve says. His voice is a little hoarser, now. His eyes nervous. "I haven't been back here since--" he pauses, "Well, you were still attending school the last time I was here."

Billy frowns. "How do you grow up in a place like this?" he asks, gesturing toward the building.

"When you're an experiment, Billy," Steve says.

Jesus.

"She wasn't the only experiment," Steve adds after a while of the sound of their shoes on pavement, of scuttling leaves caught in the breeze. They're walking through a parking lot now. Billy imagines all the people who must have at some point driven through here on their way to work, who parked and got out of their cars with their coffee, who said hi to colleagues. It's fucking creepy, is what it is, picturing people going about their daily lives in a place like this. Seeing it empty, now, in the aftermath of whatever closed it down.

Somewhere above their heads, in the overgrown trees, a bird calls out. Steve jumps. Billy tips his head back to look at the sky.

"There were other kids here?" Billy asks, thinks of how his dad had said Hawkins would be safe for them, a fresh start.

Steve nods. They stop several feet back from the glass entryway. Billy wonders if Steve's plan is to go inside. He hopes not. Billy's not scared of much, but this is fucking creepy. "They had an accident," Steve says, his voice nearly a whisper. "A door was opened. A gate--" he pauses. Billy turns his head to look at him and Steve meets his gaze. "You're going to fucking think I'm crazy," Steve says.

"I won't," Billy says. "Come on, Harrington. El has superpowers. How

much weirder can it get?"

Steve laughs at that. It's hollow, splintered, but it's a laugh all the same. He steps away from Billy. The sound his sneakers make against the pavement of the parking reverberates out from them in endless, fading echoes. There's so much green around them, Billy thinks, but this place feels haunted, not peaceful. He wonders how much of that is the actual atmosphere here and how much of it he's getting from the look on Steve's face.

Steve drops down to sit on the curb, his back to Billy. He tips his head back to stare at the building in front of him.

"Would you believe me," Steve asks, "If I told you that monsters are real?"

"Yes," Billy answers, because he knows that they are.

Steve doesn't turn back around. "The sound they make is kind of like the fisher cat from last night. They had--have?--faces that open like flowers, with rows and rows of teeth." He's still looking at the fucking building. "They could be small or walk on two feet. The first time I saw one I was at Jonathan's house. I shouldn't have been there, but I was. And then I couldn't leave, could I? I couldn't fucking leave her there--leave either of them there, not with the lights going like that."

Billy can't tell if this is a metaphor for something or if Steve's telling him the truth. It's not like Steve is talking to him. "Harrington--" Billy starts, but he doesn't know what he's going to say.

"There were monsters," Steve says. He gestures at the lab, "Real ones. They came from there, or because of there, I guess. I don't know. The science was never my strength," he pauses. "The kids called the place they came from *The Upside Down*. That's where Will went the first time. Then there was the school bus. The tunnels, because Dustin needed help. I wanted to help. Max was there." Another long pause, "If you don't believe me you can ask her, I guess."

Billy is honest enough with himself to admit he's skeptical. Monsters with flower-faces and rows of teeth coming out of a fucking lab in

*Hawkins?* It sounds--it sounds crazy. It sounds fucking crazy.

Steve still isn't looking at him, is still sitting out here in this fucking creepy parking lot, staring up at the lab. If this is some elaborate prank, Billy has to admit that it's a good one. "Harrington, for fuck's sake," he says. "Turn around."

Steve does and he wears an expression like he's trying to be casual, but when Billy meets his gaze something on Steve's face wavers, like it's on the edge of collapse.

Billy takes a heartbeat to string several thoughts together. The first is that Hopper had dropped off that fucking key this morning and Billy doesn't think Hopper's wasting time on a morning off to drop off a key so two kids he has somehow ended up responsible for can break into an abandoned government lab he also somehow ended up responsible for.

The second thought is of all of the things that had happened in Chicago, the power outage, the newspaper headline about the doctor who worked with Will. *Chicago Doctor's Throat Torn Out in Gruesome Murder* the headline had said. Billy thinks of rows and rows of teeth, of what they could do to someone's throat.

The third thought is the most important one. It's the one that makes up Billy's mind. Through all their shit and problems and fights and best moments, Steve has never, not once, actually lied to his face. He hasn't done that since the night at the Byers's house, when he'd said Max wasn't there. When--

Billy thinks of the way his car had looked when he got it back. He thinks of the syringe he never could figure out a reason for those kids having. He thinks of all the nightmares Steve has had and of how fucking insane it sounds that monsters are real, and then he thinks of Eleven growing up here with her superpowers. Something in Billy's gut twists.

Steve stands up when Billy doesn't say anything. He closes the distance between them, stops just shy of touching, shifts his weight from foot to foot. "Billy--"

“Shut up,” Billy says, presses his palm over Steve’s mouth. “Shut up for a second. I’m processing this shit.”

Steve frowns at him. Billy can’t technically see it, because his hand is still over Steve’s mouth, but he can feel it, the way the corners of Steve’s lips tug down drags against his palm. Billy drops his hand and looks at Steve. He looks back at the lab, huge and dark and ugly and wrong, in a way. He looks back at Steve, who is staring at him with those big, stupid fucking bambi eyes of his.

Okay. Billy believes him. Billy believes him because he loves him, because he trusts him. It’s that fucking simple.

“C’mere,” Billy says, opening his arms. Steve steps toward him, a little nervous, like he’s worried Billy just wants to get him in range for a good hit, and then all at once he seems to fold into himself, to fold into Billy’s arms and his embrace, to sag into his chest and press his face into Billy’s shoulder. In the shadow of that big, ugly lab, Billy cards his fingers through Steve’s hair and--it’s a lot, all right, it’s a lot to believe that, but he knows that one, most important thing for certain: Steve has never fucking lied to him.

“It was a long time ago,” Steve says against his throat. Billy can feel the heat from his breath, his mouth, familiar, essential. “But I remember it sometimes.” There’s a long pause. “Fuck, Billy,” Steve breathes against him, “When I remember it--it’s like it happened this morning, ten minutes ago, like I’m still swallowed whole in some fucking tunnel under this town. Like the remembering makes it real again.” Steve exhales, shaky and on a sob. Billy cards his fingers through Steve’s hair. He thinks of a bookshelf, of the smell of his father’s breath.

“I know,” Billy murmurs. “I know, sweetheart,” because he does know, because *this* he understands, the way monsters never really leave you all alone. In the shadow of that lab, Billy holds Steve tight in his arms and says, “It doesn’t fucking feel like it, but that was a long goddamn time ago and it’s not happening to you anymore.”

Billy, for a second, isn’t sure if he’s talking to Steve or to himself. Isn’t sure that it matters.

“You’re fucking different, now,” Billy promises him. “We’re different now. We’re together.” He can feel Steve’s tears, then, burning his neck. Billy holds him tighter. “There’s no monster in the world,” Billy promises, lips against Steve’s hair, “That could chase me away from you. What the fuck can’t we do together?”

Billy doesn’t know it when he says it, in the shadow of the Hawkins lab, clouds heavy with rain over their heads, trees green all around him, but that assertion will be tested.

It doesn’t matter, though, not to them, not on a humid July day, not when it starts raining, thick drops soaking them and everything around them. They run from the lab, stumbling back to Harrington’s borrowed car laughing and shoving at each other. When they get back to the house, they strip out of soaked jeans and tshirts. Billy tests a theory, drags his mouth and fingers over every single inch of Steve’s skin until they’re both coming apart, together. Steve finds peace in that, comfort in that. Billy finds relief.

No more secrets, Billy thinks, once they finally make it to a bed and Steve is napping against his chest. He can fucking work with that.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So, some suspension of disbelief required for where fisher cats live, probably. If you’ve never heard one though, they’re *absolutely horrible* and you should listen to it [here!](#)

Anyway, see you next time in Chicago: Adventures of giant dumb in love people.

I’m on tumblr @lymricks and I love talking.